

JOHN MARIN

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

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1. PORTRAIT OF JOHN MARIN (1920) by Alfred Stieglitz

J O H N M A R I N

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

BY E. M. B E N S O N

THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS

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TO GERTRUDE

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E. M. B.

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JOHN MARIN

2. THREE MASTER (water color) 1923.
Collection Philip L. Goodwin



I. MARIN, THE MAN

as much of him as it is possible to separate from his work . . .

TO THE WORLD at large there is nothing especially astonishing in the fact that John Marin is about to round out his sixty-fifth year. To those who know this fellow with hair cropped low over a broad forehead and a face as full of wrinkles as a winter apple,—this stubborn, arithmetical fact seems hardly credible. For in neither the man nor his work is one ever aware of the clicking heels of time but rather of something as ageless and as mobile as the sea or the sky. The comparison is not an arbitrary one. Marin

x is what Marin does. A painter of sky, sea, and mountain forms, and all things "pertaining thereto," something of their combined essence has clung to him, as moss to stone, as the smell of fish to a fisherman, of wood-shavings to a carpenter, or graft to a politician.

The man Marin is all those things with which the artist Marin has identified himself, which some forty years of intensive seeing and doing in and with the physical world have made him: the swift movement of tides cutting channel patterns in the sea; islands at sunset locked in velvet shadows; sailing ships braced against a smacking wind or idling in calm waters; scrub pines clustered against the breast of mountains; trees on mountain tops, shaggy as the wool of goats, piercing dry air with porcupine branches; roads that bend and wind as gracefully as dancers, as perilously as acrobats; buildings of stone and steel crouching together like sheep in a storm, or pyramided, painting the sky with shafts of silver; people in city streets churned between canyons of light and shadow. Marin is all these things and many more. And he is neither older nor younger than the formal equivalents into which his art has resolved them. One must be young to bear such visions, to suckle them in darkness and light, in and out of season; strong, full throated visions which, like their maker, remain eternally young.

Not all visions remain young. Many die in childbirth. Thousands are dead but do not know it. They are the pictorial incubi spawned in the bed of undesire; scrawny, rachitic, counterfeit visions; pieces of nature which nature, if it could voice its protest, would repudiate. "You there, hanging on the wall," nature would say, "you have purloined my green grass, my seas, and my mountains. But even a blind man can see that you have taken my body and left my spirit behind." Nature would have other things to say about Marin because Marin has other things to say about nature.

Who is this fellow Marin, anyway? He belongs to that breed of men who wear their wisdom lightly; who haven't a pennyweight of sophistication in their make-up; who get to the root of things, not by rifling the culture-vaults of the past, but by doing their own spadework, developing their own self-discovered claims. It is not to the work of others that Marin turns for nourishment, but to the fathomless reservoir within himself which, in turn, is being constantly fed by the nature-sources of his own vision. The road he travels by bears none but his own footprints. Unsteady or faltering as they may be at times, they are always recognizably Marin's and no one else's.

As in most pioneers, there is something pugnaciously dogmatic in Marin's make-up. A kind of blind, instinctive determinism which, curiously enough, carries him unerringly to his port of call. He is driven forward by the fuel of strong convictions based exclusively on the visual world as he sees it and knows it. As long as he stays within the borders of this, his own rich experience, the rightness of his values remains irrefutable. The moment, however, that he ventures outside this familiar, self-explored territory, into the trackless (for him) terrain of political economy, or into assessments of the work of his contemporaries, his doggedness seems provincial, naive, or just irrational. But unlike most pioneers, Marin is aware of his own pendulous inconsistencies of feeling and is capable of examining himself in the mirror of self-criticism with unflinching honesty. He has said of himself:

Curiously twisted ceratnre.
Prejudiced as Hell.
Unprejudiced as Hell.
Narrow as they make 'em.
Broad-minded next minnte.

*Hating everything foreign, to a degree, with the opposite
coming in time and again.*

A shouting, spread-eagled American.

*A drooping, wet-winged sort of nameless fowl the next.**

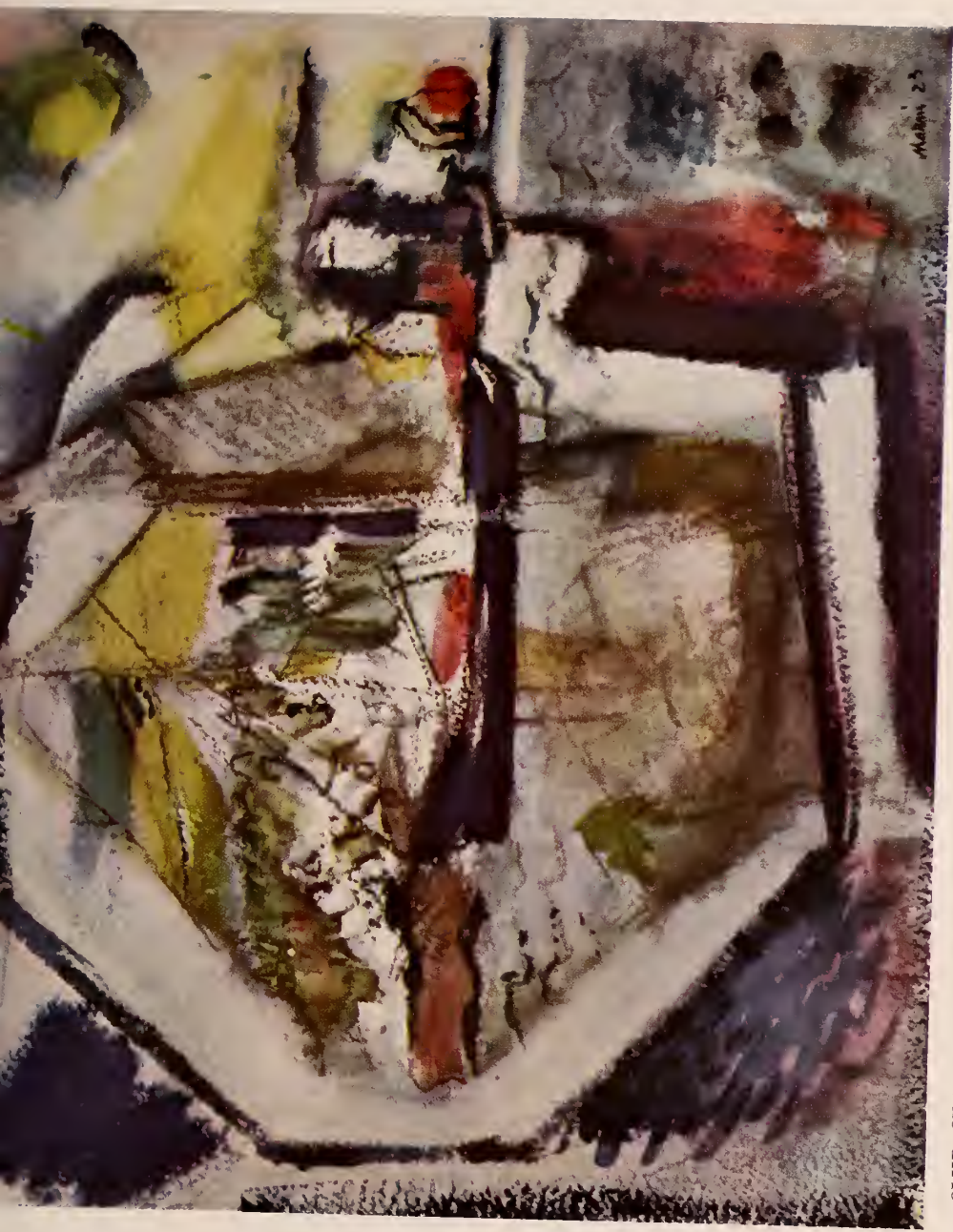
— Marin obviously has no wish to deceive himself or others. None the less he would rather be “wrong” than untrue to his own deepest feelings, even at the cost of seeming “irrational.” Paradoxically, it is this same doggedness, this insistence on checking all incoming ideas against the ledger of his own creative life, that has kept him from being bullied into accepting opinions, social or aesthetic, which strike him as being faddist. An example of this is his steadfast refusal to be swept off his feet by Cubist and Post-Cubist art. Nor has he been willing to swell the throng of Cézanne’s numerous enthusiasts. “As for Cézanne,” Marin recently confided to me,** “when in this country I saw Cézannes I said to myself there’s a painter, not much else. But there are other painters. I am afraid my dear fellow that now—from my point of view—that you and others have given Cézanne too much space, helped on by those Frenchmen.”***

There is an overtone of resentment in Marin’s remark; the justified resentment of a first-rate American artist who for

* From a letter to Alfred Stieglitz, dated August 21, 1927, Stonington, Maine.

** In a letter to the author, dated August 17, 1935, Cape Split, Maine.

*** Marin’s introduction to Cézanne took place in the spring of 1911 at Alfred Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession Gallery where a selection of Cézanne’s water colors were being exhibited for the first time in America. Marin again saw Cézanne’s,—paintings this time,—in 1913 at the international Armory Show, and not, as one might imagine, in and about Paris where Marin lived and worked off and on from 1905 to 1910. It is difficult to believe that Marin was unaware of Cézanne’s existence until five years after his death. But if one knows Marin, and his self-sufficient preoccupation with his own “seeing,” this seems less incredible.



3. SHIP, SEA, AND SKY FORMS (water color) 1923. Courtesy Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts



4. ATLANTIC SERIES (pen drawing) 1905. Courtesy An American Place



5. BRIDGE CANAL, AMSTERDAM (etching with tone) 1906. Courtesy An American Place

many years was obliged to stand on the sidelines while a troupe of cleverly press-agented Frenchmen, most of them creatively inferior to Marin, carried off the day. His feeling about Cézanne, however, goes deeper than a mere personal grudge against the thing the dealers and other professional evangelists have made of him and his progeny. Its origin springs rather from the fact that Marin's approach to nature (I am using the term generically to include all visual phenomena) and to picture-making is in many ways opposed to Cézanne's; and that consequently, although Marin might respect Cézanne's achievements, it would be the respect that one skilled workman feels for another whose creative temperament is so essentially different from his own that only polite words can pass between them.

The exact nature of this difference, as well as the source of its origin in the men and their work, requires a more searching analysis than is possible in a study of this kind. Nevertheless, it is relevant to point out here that the two artists are as different as a poet and a scientist can be, without losing sight of the fact that the poet is striving after truths that approximate those of the scientist. These truths may, and in Marin's case do, result from the same basic understanding of and control over the organic laws of nature and of art, but in arriving at them Marin seldom loses touch with the intensity and specific quality of his original creative experience. In other words, for Marin a mountain is not only a stereometric symbol for mountain, but also a specific mountain, that does specific things, is seen at a specific time of day, and is covered with specific trees, rocks, shrubbery, and flowers. So that while Marin is concerned with the universal aspect of mountain, he is equally concerned with "the relatively little things that grow on the mountain's back. Which," he insists, "if you don't recognize, you don't recog-

nize the mountain.” * It is this inclusiveness of observation (about which I shall have more to say at another time) combined with the ability to sustain the intensity and flavor of his original creative feelings which Marin usually succeeds in bringing to his work.

The reason for this, it seems to me, is that Marin’s plastic solutions are generally the result of being catapulted into them by the sharp impact of an experience with nature. Cézanne’s solutions, on the other hand, come from a more studied, perhaps more subtle, adjustment to purely formal considerations. This is not intended to mean that for Cézanne nature was less a creative point of departure than for Marin, but rather that while Cézanne converted his nature-experience almost directly into formal values, Marin receives both as a joint sensation and manages to retain them undetached throughout the whole creative act. In Marin the instinctivist and the structuralist join hands. It is never a question of whether the procedure of the one is superior to the procedure of the other, but only that both exist and it is well to recognize them for what they are. Who is to say whether the spirit of Keats is more to be prized than the spirit of Milton?

For Marin painting is and has always been an end product, the consummation of living with the physical world in closest intimacy; not the passive intimacy of an aroused and sensitive spectator but the active intimacy of an aroused and sensitive participant. Whatever wisdom he has, he has drawn directly from the non-theoretical anatomy of nature, from stones and trees, ships, skies, islands, and seas. Naturally it is not of his art that he boasts—though he has good reason to—but of his ability to sail a boat, to catch a tortog with rod and reel, to skin a flounder, to beat a trail up a

* From “John Marin, by Himself,” “Creative Art,” October, 1928. See pages 105 to 107.



6. LONDON
OMNIBUS
(water color) 1908.
Collection
Alfred Stieglitz



7. STREET OF THE
CATHEDRAL,
MEAUX
(oil) 1908
Courtesy
An American Place

mountainside. These for him are the prelude to art, and, as we shall see, the only real tutelage he has ever had.

In all probability Marin would never have set foot in an art school if his family hadn't demanded some seemingly concrete return for their hard-earned dollars. They looked upon young Marin's talent with the usual middle-class trepidation. Had Marin declared his intention of becoming a race-track tout, or a bartender, he couldn't have stirred up a more vicious hornet's nest of mingled antagonism and terror in this Yankee * household. They were dismally aware, however, that Marin didn't have the makings of a great Robber Baron like Vanderbilt, Harriman, or Gould, or even a small-town insurance solicitor. He had had his innings in business, among other things, four years in architects' offices where he showed a greater aptitude for drawing "bunnies" than blueprints. It was decided in solemn family conclave that there was nothing to be done about this "natural" but bundle him off to some respectable art school where he could learn how to paint, they secretly hoped, salable pictures. The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts was the chosen asylum.

Marin's two years at the Academy (1898-1900) didn't affect him either for good or evil. He worked more or less unhindered, sketching out of doors when he had the urge—which he preferred to the prescribed, indoor finger exercises—playing billiards, or drinking beer with "the boys." Joseph Hergesheimer, the once talented novelist who has long since turned into a *Saturday Evening Post* hack, was one of them (it was then fashionable for the pampered scions of wealthy, middle-class families to get a taste of Bohemia at a local art

* This "Yankee" cocktail consisted of the usual American ingredients. "My ancestors," Marin once wrote to an inquiring magazine editor, "were of the best English Ale, Dutch Bitters, Irish Gin, French Vermouth, and plain Scotch."

school). Arthur B. Carles, who in Paris several years later proved his friendship for Marin by calling Steichen's attention to his work, was also one of "the boys."

For Marin the Academy was little more than a post to hitch his horse to, a stopping-over-place on a long journey. The beds were hard and the food poor but the company was good. At least it seemed so to Marin who, at the time, was more in need of good company than good art instruction. Of the latter the Academy had precious little to offer. From Thomas B. Anschutz, an instructor, Marin received his first morsel of helpful advice and encouragement. In his outdoor sketches, for which he won a prize in the spring of 1900, Anschutz recognized the embryo of a unique talent and urged Marin to gird his loins for the big day. This seed of encouragement, small as it was, sent down deep roots of strengthening self-assurance.

— It was not a mere accident that from the very beginning Marin found the raw material for his art in the out-of-doors and not in Chase's "pink antique" nude class, or in goose-stepping it along with most of the other students. Perhaps Marin couldn't have said in so many words why a ferry crossing the Delaware or a woman sitting on a park bench meant more to him than a plaster cast of the Discobolus. He only knew that he was doing what gave him the greatest pleasure. It is this thing in Marin—call it what you will—this inherent ability to steer his course by the compass of his best instincts that has kept him from running aground in the deceptive harbors of academicism. He seemed immune to the thousand and one virulent diseases of artistic derivation that attack the average art student before he has strength enough to guard against them, and from which few recover. To the commanding voice of tradition, relayed to Marin through the instructors at the academy, he turned a deaf ear. His own cup of inspiration might not as yet be brimming



8. THE SEINE,
PARIS
(water color) 1909.
Courtesy
An American Place



9. GIRL SEWING,
PARIS
(water color) 1910.
Collection
Alfred Stieglitz

over, but it was the only one from which he was willing to drink.

If, therefore, it is impossible to find among his works, either early or late, a single still-life painted according to Chardinesque precepts, a single Franz Hals-Lenbach-Düsseldorf-School portrait (the popular Philadelphian recipe of the 1890's), or a nude *à la* Giorgione, Manet, or anyone else, it is because Marin simply hadn't it in him to walk over tombstones to find himself. Undoubtedly he could and did learn something from the past masters of his craft. But it was never a mannerism that he borrowed so much as a tacit confirmation of his own point of view. It was a handclasp, not a holdup. To paint a picture as Tintoretto or Whistler might have painted it was as repugnant to Marin as writing a love letter as Casanova or Dean Swift might have written it.

The next five years (1900-1905) passed though Marin's hands as sand through an hourglass. He was still marking time, testing his wings. That these years were far from productive is apparent from his own condensed report drawn up many years later:

1 year blank.

1 year Art Students' League, N. Y.

Saw KENYON COX.

2 years blank.

In playful seriousness Marin continues this chronological report through the succeeding years: "4 years abroad [1905 to 1908 and 1909 to 1910]. Played some billiards, incidentally knocked out some batches of etchings which people rave about everywhere. At this period the French Government was going to give me the *Legion d'Honor*. I refused. They then insisted on buying one of my oils ['The Mills at Meaux,' painted in 1906 and acquired for the Luxembourg in 1907]. I ran away to Venice. They set up such a howl there was

no escaping. I let them have it. Since then I have taken up Fishing and Hunting and in some spare time knocked out a few water colors for which in former years I had a leaning." *

This brief, waggish recapitulation, while it gives us something of the flavor of the man, fails to record one of the most important events of his career, his meeting with that genius of the camera, Alfred Stieglitz, who became Marin's life-long friend and a champion of his art. As early as 1909, Stieglitz, on Steichen's recommendation, had exhibited a group of Marin's water colors in a joint show with Alfred Maurer. In the summer of this same year Stieglitz came over to Paris on a visit and paid his respects to the artist whose work he had exhibited and admired. The friendship which this meeting cemented was a decisive turning point in Marin's career. He became not just another young artist with a slight reputation as an etcher who was free-lancing it in the Babylon of Paris, but John Marin, a life member of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession Gallery. He now had a sheet anchorage in the troubled waters of the future, a permanent mailing address, and a staunch defender who would fight for him and his art in fair weather and foul, which Stieglitz has done uninterruptedly from that day to this.

This support had exactly the effect on Marin's development as an artist that one might expect it to have. Previously he had to limit his work almost exclusively to etching in order to make a living. Fortunately the quality of Marin's etchings did not suffer because of the speed at which he was driven. He now devoted more time to working in water color and oil. What is still more significant, he no longer had the feeling that he was working for himself but for an

* From "Notes Autobiographical," published March, 1922. The insertions, set off in brackets, are the author's.



10. THE TYROL
AT KUFSTEIN
(water color) 1910.
Courtesy An
American Place



11. MOVEMENT,
FIFTH AVENUE
(water color) 1912.
Collection
Alfred Stieglitz

audience and above all for one understanding individual who had faith in his ability to deliver the goods.

To Marin this didn't mean that he could now rest on his laurels. He was aware that, artistically speaking, he had only begun to cut his molars. He wasn't suffering from the youthful illusion that Paris ought to declare a public holiday every time he painted a picture. He naturally hoped for recognition but he never went out of his way to court it. He lived in comparative isolation, apart from cliques and especially from artists. In Paris he lived exactly as he would have lived at home, doing the normal things that men do, trying to be part of the place, as inconspicuously as possible. The museums and picture galleries saw little of him. His days were spent roaming the countryside or the city streets, sketching and painting out of doors, or back in his room over his etching press.

What he caught of Paris in the net of his art in those days didn't come to him second-hand through the works of others. It came directly from the same milieu which enveloped Degas and Douanier-Rousseau, Monet and Renoir. In Venice, in Amsterdam, in London, in Nuremberg, in the Swiss Alps, in the villages and towns adjacent to Paris—wherever he happened to go—Marin took with him a pair of eyes that could see freshly and a hand that could record what he saw and felt in a distinctly original and personal way. That is why his etchings, water colors, and oils of this period contain in nucleus everything that Marin is or ever will be. In these early works you will find the same fluid and yet precise calligraphic notations, the same feeling for big forms cutting through space, and the matrix of what we have since come to regard as those typical Marinesque enclosures, those structural bands which hold the picture elements within a firm embrace. These are not capricious devices, stylistic cow-catchers superimposed upon the thing itself, but indigenous



12. WOOLWORTH BUILDING (etching) 1913. Collection Metropolitan Museum of Art

architectural components which grow out of the closest observation of nature's forces and what they do in themselves and to each other.

Look at Marin's 1906 etching in tone, "Bridge Canal, Amsterdam," and the structurally exciting use he made of the canal coping which lunges from deep space into the picture foreground; or his painting "Street of the Cathedral, Meaux," done two years later, with its subtle play of small, agitated forms against larger, placid ones; or the "London



13. LOOKING OUT ON CASCO BAY (water color) 1914. Collection Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts

Omnibus" water color of the same year with its structural handling of broken surfaces and forms of pure, vibrant colors enmeshed in cooler greys; or the water color of the "The Seine, Paris" of the following year and the amazing control with which these limpid, stenographic washes are set down; or, in the same medium, the "Girl Sewing" of 1910, suggesting the whole pungent mood and flavor of a thing, a place, and a period, in a color language grown increasingly concrete without loss of modulation or liveness of touch. Look at these works in the light of what Marin has done since and I think you will agree that Marin has always been Marin, at all times, in all places.

Marin was as purely himself when he returned to New York in 1910 as he was when he left it more than four years before. He had acquired wisdom and knowledge and a heightened capacity for putting down what he saw, but no European painting mannerisms, no nostalgia for the things he had left behind, and no romantic illusions about the world he was about to enter. When he went abroad in 1905, it was obviously because Europe had more to offer him than America. He was now pleasantly surprised to find that America had just as much to offer as Europe.

The New York he returned to was very different from the city he once knew. The Woolworth building was under construction; two new bridges had been swung across the East River; horse and cable cars were now almost entirely replaced by electric ones; there was an elevated railway rattling overhead and a subway growling underfoot. Time seemed to be moving faster and more raucously. Even the tugboats in the river were more boisterous. The city was passing through a corporate convulsion, a frightening and bewildering kind of high-tensioned life. It was like watching the first days of creation. Here was the raw stuff of life becoming something. Here were disorder and order, chaos



14. MARIN ISLAND, SMALL POINT, MAINE (water color) 1915.
Collection Albert Gallatin, Gallery of Living Art

and cosmos side by side. Marin watched this sideshow from a ringside seat. To bring these things to rest in his art was what concerned him. It wasn't a new Rome that he saw, the fleshpots of a nascent imperialism, but rivers, buildings, bridges, and anonymous people moving like ants among them.

The excitement of all this activity was infectious. It struck Marin like a tornado. And he put down in his art what he saw about him. More than he saw. For he sought to bring these "warring, pushing, pulling forces" to rest within the frame of his paper or canvas.



15. TREE ON MARIN ISLAND (water color) 1916. Collection Alfred Stieglitz

And then Marin discovered Maine, just as he had discovered Paris and New York, as he would one day discover the Palisades, the Berkshires, the White Mountains, New Mexico. It was indeed a discovery—for no one to my knowledge found what he found there, saw what he saw. For some twenty summers, and often far into the fall, Marin has returned to the Maine coast, not as a hunter to trap new prey, but as a native who knows each reef and boulder, each tree and island. It is with the screech of the sea gull and the pounding surf that he feels most at home. These are the elemental things on which his art has grown full and strong.

Was Marin satisfied with himself? With what he had done? Was he ready to bask in the vainglorious moonshine of his own image? Hardly. Here is his answer repeated time and again: "My work as I look at it, some early rotters. Some of it, of course, better than last year—yet not good enough," * "I wish my things were stronger, more terse." "Fewer strokes, still fewer strokes. Fewer strokes must count. A full ring to each stroke." These are not the words of a self-satisfied artist. Nor has he ever been one. If he were, he would, like so many others, have made a period of a picture. This he has never done, because his range of feeling and doing is too broad to harden into a formula; and also,—perhaps this is the most important reason,—because for him each new picture must be the fruit of new sensuous perceptions, not old ones warmed over.

To play with forms for their own sweet sake apart from their origin in fresh experience has never appealed to him. He knows what it is to play ("To have a lasso at one's belt," he has said, "a long, long rope, so as to rope in humor when she takes her long flights"), but he is not a playboy. There must be joy in the doing, otherwise he simply doesn't

* From a letter to Alfred Stieglitz, dated October 1, 1922, Stonington, Maine.

"do." And behind everything he does there is always purpose. Not a wilful, I-am-I, declamatory subjectivity, but the desire to understand the will of nature's forms, to translate this understanding into formal terms without imposing his own will upon them. This is the way Marin has put it: "Somehow, well, you are not to forget that robins naturally hop about, they don't walk. Chickens walk, they don't hop. Those are little things, yet fundamental to the beast. So it is with boats, so it is with all things. And those old boys, those of real expression, no matter how expressed, didn't make their chickens to hop.* These are the simple, bedrock observations Marin lives by and upon which his art is built.

* From a letter to Stieglitz dated October, 1919, Stonington, Maine.



16. DRAWING IN WASH, 1935. Collection of the Artist



17. SUNSET, MAINE COAST (water color) 1919. Collection Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts

18. FISH, TORTOG (water color) 1920.

Courtesy An American Place



II. MARIN, HIS WORK

"Art is plastic instinct conscious of its aims . . . an achievement, not an indulgence." Santayana: THE LIFE OF REASON

IT SHOULD by now be obvious to my readers that John Marin is not a child prodigy who paints as a bird sings in a spontaneous outpouring of unreflective song. He has what it takes to make a song, but that alone would never have produced his plastic symphonies, sonatas, fugues, concertos. In touching upon this problem I once remarked, and I think it bears repeating, that "there is a point beyond which intuition cannot possibly go, and where only those whose

intuitions have been refined into controlled knowledge are free to travel.” * How this awareness is attained and makes itself felt naturally varies with the individual artist. In Marin’s case it generally operates on a physical plane without ever becoming purely intellectual, and is assimilated as such.

More concretely this is what I mean. Recently Marin was working on a series of small drawings of nude figures in red wash in preparation for a painting.** After we had been looking at them together for some time Marin turned to me and said: “An American Indian is supposed to be pretty red, isn’t he?” I agreed. “Just imagine,” he went on, “how a spot of blue would look on his red body. Mighty good, don’t you think?” Marin was speaking his thoughts aloud. He was confirming a feeling that he had about the use of a secondary color on a large area of another color. He was trying to anchor this feeling in a physical experience, to make it more palpable, more real for him. Instead of solving his formal problems by flying blind into a theoretical void with only his instincts to guide him, what he had done was to establish a point of visual reference in the external world which could dictate as well as verify his solutions.

— This form of discipline is inherent in Marin’s whole creative procedure and is the source of his fidelity to organic truth as he perceives it in nature. Not fidelity to the superficial, pictorial manifestations of nature, but to the underlying causative logic that controls and creates these effects. “A northwest wind,” I have heard Marin say, “makes the sea look silly!” It makes it look like a lake, and his eyes tell him that a sea is not a lake, that it has its own movement, character, and individuality which distinguish it from a lake’s movement, character, and individuality. (Contrast Marin’s

* “Forms of Art,” Part IV, “Phases of Calligraphy,” June, 1935, *American Magazine of Art*.

** See plate 16.



19. TREES AND ROCKS AND SCHOONER (water color) 1921. Courtesy An American Place

treatment of his "Lake in the Tonk Mountain" water color with his "Buoy, Maine" water color and you will see how this distinction is carried out plastically in his work.) Behind such convictions, affirmed by his senses, rest organic truths governing the fitness of all things.

Respecting the laws of nature, Marin also respects the — laws of his own art, respects them sufficiently not to confuse them. Nature, he knows, exists unorganized in limitless, three-dimensional space. The elements of his art, if they are to be an art, must exist organized in a moment of time on the flat plane of his etching plate, paper or canvas. What happens on this bounded picture surface can never seek to imitate nature for the very good reason that all its values are wholly different. No matter, then, how perfect a piece of nature may be, the artist can never hope to transplant it bodily to the soil of his art. For it is not the actual, what Ezra Pound calls the "caressable," tree, person, boat, or building that he wishes to draw, etch, or paint, but some condensed aspect of their being and doing.^f This must be made to function according to the logic of the artist's graphic or plastic materials, retaining, at the same time, its essential organic logic, which is nature reasserting itself, but as a pungent memory reasserts itself, the pervasive fragment of an experience that seems more real than the experience itself. Art, therefore, whatever else it may be, is always an — abstraction, with nature as its point of departure, the flat surface its field of operation, and paints, brushes, etc., its building tools.^l

The working materials of art cannot be perfected apart from the artist's experience in nature, apart from his whole sensuous and apperceptive development as a human being. (Where this separation exists, we usually detect the sharp, musty odor of decay, as in a house that has long remained unoccupied, or a mind which thoughts no longer inhabit.)

The hand, however, must be equal to the impulse it receives. What is called an artist's technique, therefore, must be perfected as consciously as a runner's stride and gait, or as the golf-player's proper timing of his strokes, until he can do naturally what he once did with awkward deliberation, until this new knowledge becomes a conditioned reflex that can be called into service and employed at will. These are what Marin calls his red-letter days; the days when he is suddenly aware why this line or that color works as he meant it to work. These enriching discoveries are never made in complete, objective isolation, but always in relation to subject-matter and to the original experience that conceived it.

As we follow Marin's evolution in etching, water color, and oil we shall see how his ability to feel, see, and do, work hand in hand, constantly cross-checking and fertilizing each other, as the earth, the tree, and its fallen leaves and fruit, the earth. This cycle of reciprocity, which we find in nature, we find also in a comparable form in "that natural," the artist. That is what Cézanne probably meant when he said, "Art is a harmony parallel to that of nature."

Etching, water color, and oil are the three languages Marin has always spoken. Sometimes he has seemed more partial to one than to another. But only as the robin is partial to the succulent worm it happens to be feeding on. For Marin, as for Mr. Robin, and perhaps for most of us,—the immediate appetite submerges all others. There are periods during which he has worked almost exclusively in etching, water color, or oil, and, at other times, in all three.

Marin made his first etching in 1904, his last in 1932. In all he has probably etched between seventy-five and one hundred plates, most of them having been done before 1925. Like many another young artist of his generation, Marin very early fell under the spell of that professional expatriate, James MacNeill Whistler. The attraction is not difficult to



20. LOWER MANHATTAN FROM THE RIVER (water color) 1921. Courtesy An American Place

understand. Whistler was more than a man; he was an institution, an artistic melting-pot for the East and the West. In him Marin found a savory *bouillabaisse* of Hokusai, Hiroshige, Chinese art, Tanagra figurines, Tintoretto, Rembrandt, Courbet, Impressionism, and also a great deal of Whistler. He was the apostle of a still more appealing aesthetic, a new creed which he was one of the first to popularize,—art for art's sake. Although Bohemian in origin, its artistic effects were decidedly prophylactic. The emphasis was no longer on illustrative, Pre-Raphaelitic subject-matter but on the raw elements of design. It was the beginning of a new objectivity in painting, that was to reach its apogee in Cézanne, its anti-climax in Cubism. Whistler may have been a fop and a showman, but he was also an artist, one of the most sensitive his age produced. He was to Marin what Delacroix was to Van Gogh, Velasquez to Manet, Pissarro to Cézanne; with this difference: Marin lacked the supine adoration which these artists felt for their heroes. He never used Whistler as a text to be quoted on every occasion, but as a poem whose meaning haunted his memory.

Like Callot, Rembrandt, Goya, and Ensor, Marin never passed through the fumbling stage as an etcher; or if he did, he carefully concealed all evidence of it. Even his earliest etchings of street scenes, buildings, and bridges show an unusual command of the medium. It was several years, however, before he completely liberated himself from the atmospheric point of view of the romantic pedestrian on his trip abroad. After a couple of attempts, one at least being successful, his "Bridge Canal, Amsterdam" etching, he gave up the idea of getting tonalities in etching, and in a process which he later perfected, restricted their use to large areas, not worked into the body of the plate itself, but applied to the finished plate, as in the two abstract engravings of buildings which he completed in 1925. From the very start he was

aware—though he did not immediately succeed in putting this knowledge to its most effective use—that an etched line has a quality all its own; that it is not a fluid, drawn line, such as a pencil can best execute, but a hard, resistant, metallic line bitten into copper, which must look and act like what it is. He attempted to do this by making each line a distinct and separate unit of construction, the one clearly and cleanly relating to the other and to the surface of the plate. Marin's Parisian and Venetian etchings did not always attain this ideal state, but many of them came mighty close to it.

From 1905 to 1910 his work in etching passed through three parallel stages of development: (1) the etching in which the forms are indicated by swift, drawing-like lines; (2) the descriptive etching which documents a fact, such as the facade of a cathedral; (3) the etching in which the descriptive fact is reduced to a calligraphic symbol for the fact. Something of all three approaches was poured into his 1913 "Woolworth" and "Brooklyn Bridge" etching series. There was romantic bravura here, but also an effort toward increased simplification, culminating some years later in his "Downtown, River Movement" etching. This was the fulfillment of everything that Marin had been "gunning for" in etching. Technique alone could never have produced it. For if it were only technique that was required, Marin displayed more pure, technical virtuosity in his earlier than his later etchings. It was made possible, rather, by the rich harvest of experience which twelve years of nature observation and water color painting had yielded. A new science of seeing and doing was brewing in Marin and this was automatically siphoned off to his work in etching. The eyes of the spectator were no longer permitted the careless luxury of wandering haphazardly over the etching to discover its contents but were now firmly harnessed to the directing will of the artist.



21. LOWER MANHATTAN (water color) 1921. Courtesy An American Place

22. SEA, TREE, AND BOAT, SMALL POINT, MAINE (oil) 1921.

Courtesy An American Place



One was compelled to see the etching as it was meant to be seen. To accomplish this Marin limited the etching forms to the number of unit relationships which could be thoroughly absorbed by the seeing eye; and he curbed the temptation to add graphic notations that, however meaningful their associative value might be for him, would detract from the total formal effectiveness of his work.

What Marin had learned as an etcher he also, as we shall presently see, put to good use in water color, a medium in which it is generally admitted he has gone further than any of his contemporaries either European or American. This admission was not easily won, especially from those who, in

the first place, were in the habit of arguing that a water color at its best was hardly comparable in creative significance with an oil painting at its best. It was this kind of aesthetic Aryanism over which Marin had constantly to hurdle before his pictures were looked upon sympathetically. This hostility to the medium, though considerably diluted by now, has an insidious way of showing its fangs at such exhibitions as the Carnegie International, from which Marin, until only recently, had been consistently excluded.

Water color is a medium that in itself and aside from what is done with it, is as sensuously exciting as semi-precious jewelry. It is to oil paint what jade and coral are to granite and brick. And its artistic use as a fluid wash of color on semi-absorbent paper, defying revision of any kind, demands a sureness of touch and spontaneity of handling that most nearly approach Chinese script. Our sense of pleasure, whether or not we are conscious of it, is largely due to these factors. The lay-spectator, therefore, if he is free from sectarian prejudice, comes to water color with more instinctive sympathy than to oil painting. This does not necessarily mean that the water colorist's job is any easier than the oil painter's. In many respects, it is considerably more difficult. Whereas the painter in oil can nurse his visions along slowly, altering or adding as he sees fit, the water colorist has no such freedom. What he sets down must be his final statement, his last will and testament. To make this possible he must see the end before the beginning. The finished picture must exist in his mind's eye before his brush gives it substance.

The method of water color painting being an intensely physical one, one in which all the artist's creative resources are mobilized for quick action, the subject most suited to the method is also one that is intensely physical in character, an insistent mood of nature that seems to impress a unified



23. MAINE ISLANDS (water color) 1922. Collection Phillips Memorial Gallery

aspect upon all its parts. Actually this unity of appearance does not exist in nature. It is a potential which the artist is moved to consummate in terms of his art. Let me illustrate. The sun and the wind, functioning together or singly, have a way of doing different things to nature's forms. A summer sun at high noon seems to devour objects by immersing them in an even bath of intense light that robs them of their color and weight; at dusk it encloses them in a dense silhouette, separating their colors and increasing their weight. The wind is equally coercive and various in its effect on objects. It tends to make them look ragged or sharp-edged depending on its strength and the intensity of the sunlight that accompanies it. These sensations, when recorded by the artist, become even more positive. "Every boat of every description," Marin wrote from Stonington, Maine, "has its nose pointed into the wind and it seems as if all the houses of the village are likewise pointed windward." * It is from nature potentials of this kind that Marin generally takes his creative cues. They not only provide him with the initial impetus to do a thing, but his "piercing seeing" of that thing projects him into the formal solution of it.

Astonishing as it may seem, no two of these solutions are ever quite the same. Never—and I think I have the right to say this after having examined more than a thousand water colors which Marin has done during the last thirty years—never have I once had the feeling that he was strumming on the same G-string, revamping an old sensation. You may not always be satisfied with what he has done but you are always forced to admit that he is going somewhere, somewhere he has never gone before. And, personally, I am always anxious to make this journey with him.

Marin found himself in water color as early as 1908, found that he could make it say what he was unable to

* From a letter to Alfred Stieglitz, dated September 14, 1920.

express in oil. In his oils of this period he had been painting in twilight tonalities according to an inherited color formula. He had been trying to graft his unspoiled way of seeing on somebody else's color sense, and the result didn't satisfy him. His work in water color was his passport to a new world and he never returned to the other. When he began to work in oil again several years later, what he did bore no relation to his earlier work either in color or in the way he used it to build his picture.

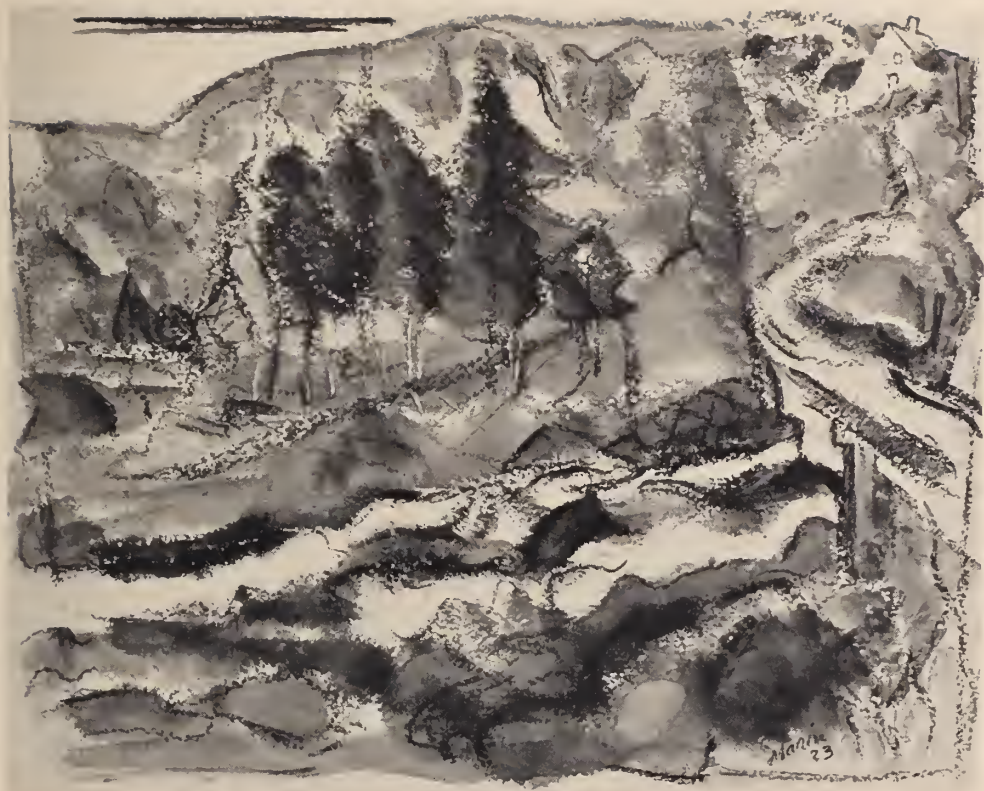
Temporarily at least his work in water color took precedence over everything else. It was his first real baptism in the fire of pure colors. The more intense they were, the





25. BECALMED (water color) 1923. Collection Alfred Stieglitz

24. WIND ON LAND AND SEA (water color) 1923.
Courtesy An American Place



26. TIDAL FALLS, DEER ISLE, MAINE (water color) 1923. Courtesy An American Place

better he liked them. This youthful intoxication with a new thing soon wore off as he began to notice that unless his colors were more subtly related and had greater density, they created the illusion of breaking loose from their mooring, the paper. He then made several important discoveries almost simultaneously, and these were clearly formulated in his water colors, "London Omnibus," of 1908, "The Seine, Paris" of 1909, and "The Tyrol at Kufstein," of 1910. The first had to do with the way objects crystallize under light into structural planes of color; the second with the dramatic use of space; the third with the play of small against large forms,—in this case the roof tops and turrets of Kufstein against the towering Tyrol. (Compare this water color with "Storm over Taos" done twenty years later.) As yet Marin's colors were mainly decorative rather than organic. The sheer pictorial beauty of objects went to his head. He was still something of the romantic pedestrian on his trip abroad.

New York was to Marin's development as an artist what fermenting beer-vats were to Pasteur, the telescopic lense to Galileo. Like them he read back from an effect to a cause and from this cause he established a creative approach, a working equation, a new principle of plastic construction. He knew now what he was after and how he wanted to achieve it. "I see great forces at work," he wrote in the spring of 1913, three years after his return from abroad, "great movements; the large buildings and the small buildings; the warring of the great and the small; influences of one mass on another greater or smaller mass. . . . In life all things come under the magnetic influence of other things; the bigger assert themselves strongly, the smaller not so much, but still they assert themselves, and though hidden they strive to be seen and in so doing change their bent and direction. While these powers are at work pushing, pulling, sideways, downward, upward, I can hear the sound

of their strife and there is great music being played." And he concluded, "Within the frames there must be a balance, a controlling of these warring, pushing, pulling forces. This is what I am trying to realize. But we are all human."

Where Marin previously perceived a few simple relationships he now detected an infinite number of complex ones. But before they could be thoroughly assimilated in terms of his art he had first to put his emotive house in order,—to gain some measure of detachment from the explosive character of his environment and his subjective reaction to it. It is mainly the repercussive quality of the New York scene that we find, for example, in Marin's 1912 water color "Movement, Fifth Avenue," *plate 11*. He had, however, gained sufficient control over his feelings by this time to be able to dissect the material of his experience on the operating table of his art, rather than merely to document its crushing effect on his senses. He was searching now for some structurally integrative principle that could permanently chain the eruptive elements of the visual world within the frame of his picture.

His vision began to cut beneath the shell of objects to the kernel of their essential, abstract form, to strip them of everything but their dominant and most insistent plastic aspects. The spire of Saint Paul's became an ascending, calligraphic serpent; the Woolworth building, a swaying giant; and so on. There was richness of feeling here as well as great purity of expression,—the scaffolding on which to build an art. Marin had sharpened his working tools to a precision-point equal to whatever demands he might make on them. He had scaled the summit of his first Peak in Darien and surveyed the hills and plateaus that lay spread below him. Through whatever artistic wilderness his future footsteps might take him he saw now more clearly than ever the exact nature of his quest and the steps he must take to attain it.



27. MAINE TOWN (water color) 1923. Courtesy An American Place



28. STONINGTON, MAINE (water color) 1924. Courtesy An American Place

The Maine coast was the happiest discovery Marin ever made. It struck him like a revelation, throwing open all the sluices of his genius. He found here what he was unable to find abroad, in the Berkshires, the Adirondacks, on Manhattan Island,—a complete world: islands, trees, grass, mountains, flowers, sand, rocks, fish, wild fowl, ships, houses, people, and an endless expanse of sea and sky. Also a startling nearness to things, their touch, sound, smell, COLOR. How to put this down on paper so that it can live on paper as it lives in nature,—this was the nightmare that tormented Marin's waking hours.



29. EASTERN BOULEVARD, WEEHAWKEN, NEW JERSEY
(water color) 1925. Courtesy An American Place

He began by making the simplest possible statements, songs of infinite tenderness and humility. He played his "instruments" cautiously using simple washes of cerulean blue deepening into ultramarine with only sparing use of light red, rose madder, cadmium yellow, oxide of chromium green, gray running into violet. As yet black was an unknown quantity. This restraint in the use of color was not a sign of timidity on Marin's part, but rather it indicated an effort to make each spot of color an integral, functioning unit of his picture. He was trying to build the house of his art as solidly as nature builds hers, and with a parallel adjustment to organic forces, to weight-balances, tension, density, mobility. And so it was that the ships sailing across Casco Bay and Stonington Harbor taught Marin more about the science of picture-making than he had ever learned at an art school. After all, it was in a bathtub, not a laboratory, that Archimedes is said to have discovered the law of displacement; it was in a hall bedroom, not a university library, that Karl Marx wrote "Das Kapital."

By the end of Marin's first summer at Casco Bay (1914) he had gained sufficient knowledge of his environment and confidence in himself to attempt to document the more complex moods of nature, to play one plastic theme against another with as much concern for their struggle as their song. He was, at the same time, making greater demands on his color orchestra, drawing on the brasses as well as the wood-winds, the base viol as well as the fiddle. Although the blues were still predominant, they were now broken up into small, related areas and distributed strategically over the picture surface.

In his water color of this year, "Looking Out on Casco Bay," *plate* 13, we have the first clear formulation of what I shall henceforth call Marin's "Near and Far Vision." This disciplined form of seeing is, as I shall presently point out,



30. DOWNTOWN,
RIVER
MOVEMENT
(etching) 1925.
Collection Museum
of Fine Arts,
Boston



31. TELEPHONE
BUILDING
(water color) 1926.
Courtesy An
American Place

32. THE PINE TREE, SMALL POINT, MAINE
(water color) 1926.
Courtesy An American Place

33. MT. CHOCORUA (water color) 1926.
Collection Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University



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35. WHITE MOUNTAINS, AUTUMN (water color) 1927. Courtesy
An American Place

characteristic of all Marin's work both in water color and oil. It is a dynamic element that is present also in the work of many painters who, like Marin, were especially close to nature,—as were Claude Lorrain and Dürer (in their water colors), Breughel, Tintoretto (cf., "The Miracle of the Loaves and the Fishes" in the Metropolitan Museum of Art), El Greco (in such landscapes as "The View of Toledo"), Constable, and Van Gogh.

— Marin wanted especially to catch the look of the near earth against the look of the far sky. For he never lost sight

of the closeness of their relationship and all things they enclose. The "Near and Far Vision" is his answer to the problem of so relating the near to the receding color-forms on the surface of his picture as to recreate in true equivalents the organic quality of the original color-experience in its focal progression from the near to the far. Marin was not only holding himself answerable to the abstract, formal requirements of picture-making, but also to the full flavor, sensuous and psychological, of his experience in nature.

Let us see how this is resolved in the Casco Bay water color. We are led by a series of modulated color jumps,—what Marin calls "spots of eye arrest,"—from the intense, rich blue, blue-violet, and yellow-greens of the shrubbery and tree forms in the foreground, out to the cool gray-greens of the ruffled sea in the middle ground, and back to the first plane of the picture by the blue-gray cloud forms.

In the "Main Island" water color, *plate 14*, of the following year, we have, on a larger and more abstract scale, an even more perfect solution of the same problem. With this important difference: space is introduced as an active rather than a static concept. It is no longer a passive field on which objects are placed, but an active one with a militant will of its own. As space becomes a live thing, it reacts against other live things, creating friction if the things in its field of action are more resistant, and motion, if less resistant. So that objects that exist within a picture world of militant space can no longer remain tranquil, but are potentially mobile. The problem this raises for the painter who produces this situation in his picture is how to resist the disintegration of these mobile parts, to keep them alive and yet so relate them as to prevent their diffusion.

Whereas the solution to this problem was implicit in many of the things that Marin did up to this point, it was now made explicit in the "Marin Island" water color. Here



36. THE HARBOR, DEER ISLE, MAINE, AND PERTAINING THERETO (water color) 1927. Collection Alfred Stieglitz



37. SCHOONERS, MAINE (water color) 1928. Courtesy An American Place

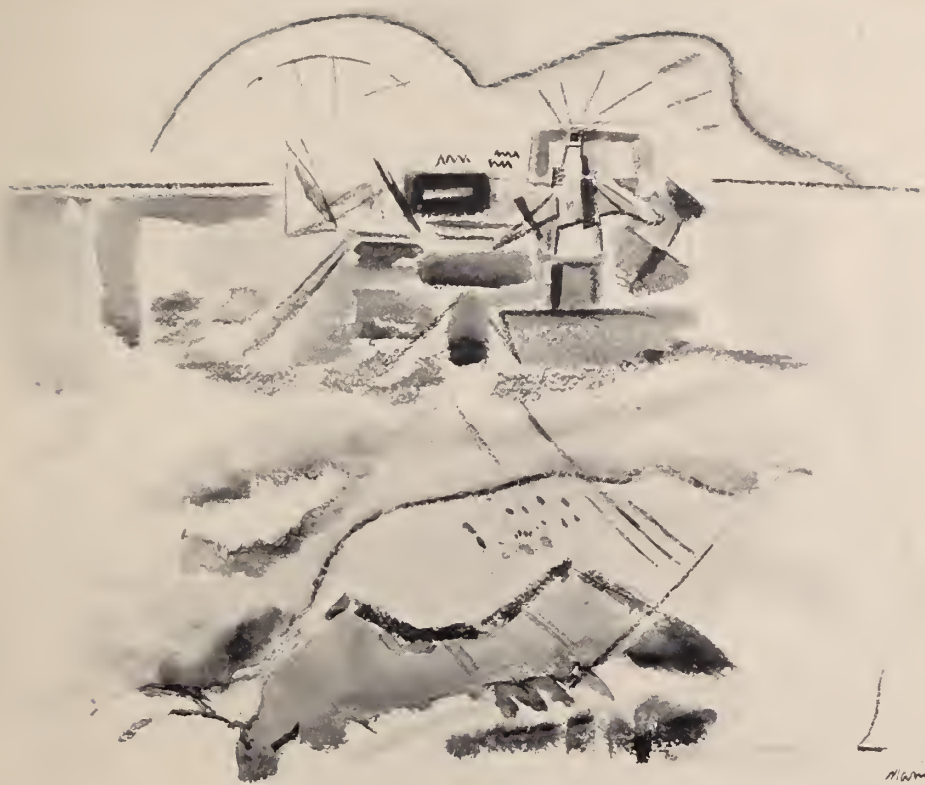
finally is a picture that needs no frame to establish its boundaries; whose parts are so finely orchestrated as to create the illusion of movement without the fear of chaos. Our eye is led along the mixed currents of these forms like so many stones skipping over water in a pre-arranged plan. Everything seems to relate to something else, to lead to something else, to be part of a great design, the ebb and flow of a superb pattern. As we look at these forms we are no longer aware of tree, water, and sky in the representational sense, but of abstract symbols for them. It is the calligraphic signature which we now accept for the fact: the jagged line for the swift movement of water; the triangle for the tree; the spot of color for the sun or the flower. These plastic metaphors are the body and blood of Marin's art. We will see them used again and again in his work and each time more richly: in "Lower Manhattan from the River" 1921, *plate* 20, "The Pine Tree" 1926, *plate* 32, "The Harbor and Pertaining to Deer Isle" 1927, *plate* 39,—reaching their sonorous peak in "Street Crossing" 1928, *plate* 40, the water color in the Duncan Phillips collection, and in "Abstraction, Manhattan" 1928, *plate* 38.

It was probably with these pictures in mind and the problems which they suggested to him that Marin remarked: "The glorious thing is that we cannot do, elementally do other than our ancestors did. That is, that a round conveys to all who see it a similar definite, a triangle a similar definite, solids of certain forms similar definites,—that a line—what I am driving at is that a round remains, a triangle remains, a line remains and always was." Which is approximately what Cézanne was "driving at" when he made that now famous remark about cubes and cones.

Equally significant are the cloud enclosures in the "Marin Island" picture because we will soon find Marin making a more positive and dramatic use of them. They serve several

functions: they limit the extent to which our eyes can travel into the picture depth; they serve to remind us that this is a water color on a flat paper surface not a three-dimensional piece of nature; they also help to fix our interest where it belongs, within the picture, not on the edge of it or outside it. Wherever these enclosure forms appear in Marin's work you will find that they are never arbitrary or whimsical devices of the artist, but that they always grow out of the specific, structural needs of the work in question and are indigenous to its subject-matter,—are in fact its





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39. THE HARBOR AND PERTAINING TO DEER ISLE, MAINE (water color)
1927. Collection Alfred Stieglitz

38. ABSTRACTION, LOWER MANHATTAN
(water color) 1928.

Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art

offspring. Just as reflections are the offspring of the bodies that cast them (cf., "Becalmed" 1923, *plate* 25, "Maine Islands" 1922, *plate* 23, "Maine Town" 1923, *plate* 27, "Ship, Sea, and Sky Forms" 1923, *plate* 3) as well as those that reflect them.

• As Marin's experience in nature became richer, his enclosure forms took on a steadily increasing significance. In 1921 and 1922 we notice their use for the purpose of dividing one activity in a picture from another, to preserve the relationship of these separate, active parts to the spatial whole without destroying the essential character of each; to keep the quality of ship distinct from the quality of tree, house, island, person,—somewhat like notes in a musical score or molecules of different atomic weights in the same solution. (Cf., "Trees and Rocks and Schooner" 1921, *plate* 19.) This finally led to the development of related, enclosure episodes within a picture,—which we find in the "Stonington Maine" water color of 1924, *plate* 28, the etching of 1925, "Downtown, River Movement," *plate* 30, and the water color, "Telephone Building," *plate* 31, of the following year.

• There were several inherent limitations to this procedure: instead of revealing the character of the objects, it tended to mannequinize them, to muffle their mobility. While it did, of course, also have the effect of interlocking all the planes of the picture and integrating their parts,—this was achieved at too great a sacrifice to the sensuous life of the picture. That Marin was aware of these limitations can be safely assumed from the fact that he ultimately discarded the more rigid, skeletal geometry of these enclosure compartments, retaining only those elements which he could use to forge a stronger art. This experimental interlude, while not immediately fruitful in itself, paved the way for some of Marin's most completely successful water colors, among

them "Pertaining to Stonington Harbor" 1926, *plate* 34, and "The Harbor, Deer Isle Maine and Pertaining Thereto" 1927, *plate* 36, two epic achievements, "Street Crossing" 1928, *plate* 40, more detached emotionally, but no less extraordinary, and "Phippsburg, Maine" 1932, *plate* 44, which brought to an exquisite culmination everything that Marin aimed for in his "Stonington, Maine" water color.

• At about the time that Marin was working up to his episodic enclosures he made an important discovery,—as important as any he has ever made,—he discovered BLACK, lamp black on his water color palette. That Marin made little use of black before 1920 can be explained, I think, in the following way. His water colors were not yet robust enough to be able to exist on the same surface with any force as powerful as black. It was only after his colors gained greater density, resonance, and weight, and his forms became more concrete, more solid in construction, that black could be introduced without causing havoc. Although he first used dull opaque black purely, he later gave it a lustrous, almost enamel quality by using it beside or over washes of deep blue, red, and opaque green, as in his water color, "Pertaining to Stonington Harbor, Maine." But here his blacks were still being used as strong accents rather than dominant notes. It was not until we get the "Mt. Chocorua" water color of 1926, *plate* 33, and especially "White Mountains, Autumn" of 1927, *plate* 35, that black becomes a leading symphonic theme.

• But this is only half the story of black. We still have to account for its deeper origin in Marin's visual life. For like almost every other element in Marin's work, black also has its source, I believe, in nature experience. A summer sunset-closing on the Maine coast or in the White Mountains with its velvety, black silhouettes, provides an unforgettable lesson in the use of black, which, Marin being what he is, would



40. STREET CROSSING, New York (water color) 1928. Collection Phillips Memorial Gallery

41. STORM OVER TAOS, NEW MEXICO (water color) 1930.
Collection Alfred Stieglitz

42. CORN DANCE, NEW MEXICO (water color) 1929.
Courtesy An American Place



have fixed firmly in his memory. Similarly his experience with New York's skyline probably turned his attention to those opalescent grays which he uses in many of his New York pictures,—as his New Mexico experience nurtured his interest in light as a distinct element apart from form or color. "If you think you know what light is," I have heard Marin say, "then go to New Mexico and you'll find a quality of light many times more intense than anything you get in New York, or Maine, or the White Mountains."

•Marin found other things in New Mexico as well. The subtlest gradations of color beside and within monumental forms; nature's marriage of the lyric and the epic. In "Storm Over Taos, New Mexico" 1930, *plate* 41, we get something of both. And the result is a masterpiece. This picture has all the directness, fluidity, and accuracy of touch of a great Chinese landscape painting, or a water color by Claude Lorrain; but these elements have now been redistilled into new values that strike deeper plastic and human chords, not merely suspended in an atmospheric emulsion but clarified and richly related. When Marin turned from the landscape of New Mexico to the people, as in his "Corn Dance" 1929 water color, *plate* 42, what Marin feels and states superbly is the abstract, hieroglyphic ritual of the dance, but *not* the spirit of the dancers. One could scarcely guess that these are the same dancers about whom D. H. Lawrence wrote: "Never shall I forget watching the dancers, the men with the fox-skin swaying from their buttocks . . . the women with seed-rattles following . . . the long, streaming, glistening black hair of the men."

I think that Marin recognized this limitation, and, in his more recent work, has attempted to do for people what he has done so admirably for mountains, trees, and ships. His water color, "Blue-Eyed Figure and Sea" of 1934, *plate* 49, is his first return to the human form in this medium since

his water color of 1910, "Girl Sewing, Paris." His 1935 water colors and oils also indicate an increasing preoccupation with figure studies. This seems to prophesy a new direction. At sixty-five Marin is still the professional pioneer.

• As an oil painter Marin has still to reach the stature he has attained as a water color painter. This is not to gainsay the enormous progress he has made in this medium since 1921, the official year of his return to oil pigments after an interval of about ten years.* When Marin did set to work again in oil, it was only natural that he should have been strongly, if only temporarily, influenced by his work in water color. He first handled the medium almost as loosely as water color, working in large nature forms and broad, swinging rhythms. His oil "Sea, Tree, and Boat" of 1921, *plate 22*, is a typical example of the confusion that results from thinking in one medium and working in another. The picture is almost completely devoid of color,—the predominant forms being painted in black and white sparsely accented with blue, brown, and green. Marin was far from pleased with this performance. But he knew that to attempt to come to grips with the business of oil painting at a moment when he was struggling to clear a path for himself in water color might prove fatal to the latter, if not to both. This meant that he would have to forego the former.

When Marin again returned to oil in 1928, it was with an assurance which he did not have in 1921. He had been building pictures in water color which, as far as structural organization went, could meet the stiffest oil painting criteria. The reason for this was that during the last half dozen years a good portion of his water colors had not been painted directly from nature but in his studio. This permitted a slower process of building up the picture comparable

* Critical references to Marin's early work in oil are to be found on pages 32 and 60.



43. BUOY, MAINE (water color) 1931. Collection Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Philip L. Goodwin



44. PHIPPSBURG, MAINE (water color) 1932. Courtesy An American Place

45. FIFTH AVENUE LOOKING WEST AT FORTY-SECOND STREET
(oil) 1933. Courtesy An American Place

46. LAKE IN THE TONK MOUNTAIN (water color) 1934.
Courtesy An American Place



to working in oil with similar subject matter. So that Marin, when he began again to work in oil in 1928, had exactly the preparatory training which he needed. Although this eased his path, he found that the major problems had still to be fought out on the battlefield of the medium itself.

From 1928 to 1930 Marin's oils were painted mostly out-of-doors in the summer and fall of the year, and though his pictures capture some of the breadth and sweep of the great spaces before which he worked, they are too loosely knit and lack concreteness and precision of touch. His colors, too, are still too fluid, indecisive, and monochromatic, as if he were searching for words which failed to come to his lips and reached for substitutes instead. During the following year he began to discover the essential quality of oil pigments by using them almost as thickly as they could be squeezed from his tubes. His palette was considerably enriched. He now used zinc white and ultramarine blue or venetian red in sharp, singing, melodious contrasts. Marin had also begun to do some painting in his studio. This had the effect of making him less dependent on the immediate sensations which he received from objects and more on their basic, plastic potentialities.

The first important large painting to come from his studio was "Fifth Avenue Looking West at 42nd Street" 1933, *plate* 45. Though in no sense a masterpiece, it is important as much for what it is as for what it promises. In this picture Marin had thinned out his pigments without losing their distinct oil pigment quality. And he had introduced the human figure as a concrete, positive note. Not alone that, but Marin was beginning to see New York as intimately as he saw the Maine coast, even to the nude bronze figurine pirouetting on the dome of the traffic light! If there was no new depth of feeling here, there was at least a forthright attempt at solving new problems in a fresh, direct, and sensitive way.

From this picture to "Circus Forms" of the following year, *plate* 48, the line of travel is clear and straight. The human form has again been stepped up to even greater importance. This picture ties together all the loose threads that make many of Marin's previous works fall short of their goal, and does this, I think, magnificently. It also sounds a note which we are to find repeated again with equal success in "Sealadies, Cape Split, Maine" 1935, *plate* 50,—the nude figure in a major rôle. This resurgent interest in the human form means, if we read between the lines, that Marin has clearly marked out a new destination for himself. Whether or not he reaches it will depend on his ability to probe as deeply into the organic spirit of human life as he has into "sky, sea, mountain, plain,—and those things pertaining thereto."

47. DRAWING IN WASH, 1935. Collection of the Arist.



SELECTIONS FROM MARIN'S LETTERS*

and other published and unpublished writings

Echo Lake, Pennsylvania, September 28, 1916

. . . Mountains, trees, and rocks are so sympathetic. Damned if I find most humans so. . . . Damned if you can strut amongst trees and mountains. They'd laugh at you. The human has the tendency not to laugh, but to start trying to out-strut.

Stonington, Maine, August 15, 1919

Today I am in one "Hell of a mood." I did something I rather like, a disorderly sort of a thing. I am up on my haunches. I don't know just what to do.

I sort of want to raise Hell in my stuff and don't know how to do it properly.

Feel like tearing things to pieces.

Look at that Raphael photo on the wall and hate it for its perfection, its smugness.

In my present mood don't like anything much.

Want to be crazy.

Will be crazy.

Like to paint some damn fool pictures—no you fool they may be foolish but damn foolish?

To paint disorder under a big order.

Smugness.

When is one not smug?

Is it when one is tossed about and tosses, being played with and playing? Maybe that's a thrust at it, a stab at it.

Assuredness.

* Unless otherwise indicated the letters were written to Alfred Stieglitz and are reprinted here, in whole or in part, with his permission.

Cock-surety.

Honors.

Ter Hell with Honors.

Ditto old masters, young masters, all kind of masters. Hurray for all things that come to grief, that slobber, that come a cropper. The Smugs roam the earth—no they stay put. The Smugs start all the trouble, they Exasperate.

It takes nerve not to be smug and no one has nerve enough. Nature just loves nerve.

Today I am an apostle of the crazy, but Damit, it's got to be a caged crazy, otherwise it would butt into another crazy. Then you have destruction. So. There you have the ideal humanity, crazy humanity, each in his little cage.

That would be a show.

Maybe that's what God is waiting for, for all the world to become crazy. Then he'll crate them and put a label tag on each and ship them. So that's what each one should live for, look forward to, religiously, becoming with all one's heart soul and strength CRAZY—crazy all, but it's a long way off.

The World is too full of the Smugs.

So, Weep for poor God.

So long.

Good night.

Marin.

P. S. This is one Smug letter all right.

Stonington, Maine, October, 1919

Mr. ———, Mr. ———, both of whom were up here. I seeing their work. My sort of being bowled over. Sort of thinking for the time my work flimsy, realistic, a sort of taking the wind out of my sails.

Second and third state of being after the seeing and the looking at my work, after the being flabbergasted has sort



48. CIRCUS FORMS (oil) 1934. Collection Robert H. Tannahill



49. BLUE-EYED FIGURE AND SEA (water color) 1934. Courtesy An American Place

of passed, and the feeling that somehow I approach my point of view of Maine; and the not seeing in theirs a trace of my Maine. Theirs, a sort of Pseudo-Romantic Chaldean Persian Grecian Roman Italian French German Combination Vision, an Abstract Concreteness, a monumental memory of other things.

A light-house, two figures looking out to a manufactured Sea, two figures of an old European romantic manufacture. Wagner's creations. Not Wagner's, but call it Wagner's. Not Maine. Why not? Oh, I don't know.

Sheep on an island used to Express Symbolically their European eyed Abstractions.

Now Mr. ——— showed me some things made out of Mexican silver coins, made by the Hopi or Navajo tribe of Indians. You felt there was a symbolic expression, an abstract expression, a true expression of their personal sight of things existing around about them, however abstractedly treated, still gotten from those special things, from their own lives.

Let us consider. There are sheep on these islands. Well, when they use them for their decorative purposes or their symbolic purposes, why of course these sheep assume elongated necks. And of course that is their expression. They have to have elongated necks to express what they would express.

Well, what is my objection? Well, in all felt expression, you don't question, you accept. Because I wear a high hat isn't to say I am a great man. But a man might come along who would wear a high hat in such a way that it would be his *entré* to the Hall of Fame.

No, at the root of the matter, however abstractly, however symbolically expressed, I would still have it, "Town of Stonington," "the boats of Maine," "the people of Maine," "the sheep of the Maine isles," seething with the whole atmosphere of Maine.

In all great expression you feel that, and to such an extent that one might almost say that they didn't feel it, but, well, that it just was. . . .

Let's try now to illustrate a point. This is the prow of a ship. I draw abstractly. It's cut up, yet not cut up. It does things, it assumes directions and leanings yet is not really cut up. In all its movements it remains a whole. It doesn't lose track. Mr. Fisherman, He don't maybe understand, yet he's made to feel something like he feels—as he knows prows of ships.

I make a second drawing like this.

Abstract? Why of course. Superior intelligence? Why of course.

Mr. Fisherman: "Oh Hell man, your prow is digging down into the waves it's too—being bent aside."

He's really worried now. He has cause to be. You've made a fool concrete thing unworkable when you assumed in your wonderful intelligence that it was a felt abstraction.

.

Your friend *after* the last cow has come home.

Marin.

An after thought later.

. . . I suppose I have my view point of the real Maine and somewhat fail, being, too, hampered by my kinship memories, those memories of the work of others. Maybe we have more of it than we know of.

Stonington, Deer Isle, Maine, August 21, 1927

This year to me seems to be a year of tumble down, more than ever. If I put down things haphazard, without meaning to myself, I'd say good, I am crazy and let it go at that. But this seemingly crazy stroke is put down with deliberate, mulish wilfulness. I find myself constantly juggling with things, playing one thing against another. And then when I



50. SEALADIES, CAPE SPLIT, MAINE (oil) 1931-1935. Collection of the Artist



51. RESTAURANT WITH FIGURES (oil) 1935. Courtesy An American Place

get through they look so much like Marin, they act like Marin. Cannot I ever get away from this fellow Marin? Or shall I throw this all overboard and say, Damn it all I like this fellow Marin, can't help myself. But I tell you I cuss him a plenty. . . .

* *John Marin, By Himself*

October, 1928

For the worker to carry on, to express his today, with the old instruments, the old tools, is inexcusable, unless he is thoroughly alive to the relationships of things and works in relationships. Then he can express his today in any material, preserving that material's relationship; as the relationship of two electric bulbs of different strength can be the same as the relationship of two pieces of lead of different weights.

Considering the material side of today with its insistence: glass, metals, lights, buildings of all kinds for all kinds of purposes with all kinds of material. Lights brilliant, noises startling and hard, pace setting in all directions, through-wires, people movements, much hard matter.

The life of today so keyed up, so seen, so seeming unreal — yet so real and the eye with so much to see and the ear to hear. Things happening most weirdly upside down, that it's all—what is it? But the seeing eye and the hearing ear become attuned. Then comes expression:

taut, taut

Loose and taut

electric

staccato.

The worker in parts, to create a whole, must have his parts, arrange his parts, his parts separate, his parts so placed that they are mobile (and though they don't interchange you must be made to feel that they can); have his lines of connection, his life arteries of connection. And there will be

* Written for "Creative Art" where it first appeared.

focussing points, focussing on, well, spots of eye arrest. And these spots sort of framed within themselves. Yes, there will be big parts and small parts and they will all work together, they will all have the feel, that of possible motion.

There will be the big quiet forms. There will be all sorts of movement and rhythm beats, one-two-three, two-two-three, three-one-one, all sorts, all seen and expressed in color weights. For color is life, the life Sun ashining on our World revealing in color light all things.

In the seethe of this, in the interest of this, in the doing of this, terms, abstract, concrete, third or fourth dimension—bah. Don't bother us.

For the worker, the seer, is apt to damn all terms applied by the discussionists. But the glorious thing is that we cannot do, elementally do, other than our ancestors did. That is, that a round conveys to all who see it a similar definite, a triangle a similar definite, solids of certain forms similar definites, that a line—what I am driving at is that a round remains, a triangle remains, a line remains and always was.

So that the worker of today, as of old, picks up each of these things with recognition. And as to color, we pick out red today as the old Chinaman did. And as for race language of color, all races of all times, I am sure, have had color language otherwise they are as dead people. And it's all similar elementally.

Though as I said before, all things of today are keyed up to the pitch of today.

To get to my picture, or to come back, I must for myself insist that when finished, that is when all the parts are in place and are working, that now it has become an object and will therefore have its boundaries as definite as that the prow, the stern, the sides and bottom bound a boat.

And that this my picture must not make one feel that it bursts its boundaries. The framing cannot remedy. That would be a delusion and I would have it that nothing must

cut my picture off from its finalities. And too, I am not to be destructive within. I can have things that clash. I can have a jolly good fight going on. There is always a fight going on where there are living things. But I must be able to control this fight at will with a Blessed Equilibrium.

Speaking of destruction, again, I feel that I am not to destroy this flat working surface (that focus plan of expression) that exists for all workers in all mediums. That on my flat plane I can superimpose, build up onto, can cut holes into—By George, I am not to convey the feel that it's bent out of its own individual flatness.

Too, it here comes to me with emphasis that all things within the picture must have a chance. A chance to play in their playground, as the dance should have a suitable playground as a setting for the dance.

Too it comes to me a something in which I am curiously interested. I refer to Weight Balances. As my body exerts a downward pressure on the floor, the floor in turn exerts an upward pressure on my body.

Too the pressure of the air against my body, my body against the air, all this I have to recognize when building the picture.

Seems to me the true artist must perforce go from time to time to the elemental big forms—Sky, Sea, Mountain, Plain,—and those things pertaining thereto, to sort of re-true himself up, to recharge the battery. For these big forms have everything. But to express these, you have to love these, to be a part of these in sympathy. One doesn't get very far without this love, this love to enfold too the relatively little things that grow on the mountain's back. Which if you don't recognize, you don't recognize the mountain.

And now, after looking over my scribblings on various pieces of paper, I think that what I have put down is about what I have wanted to say, the gist of it anyway. My present day creed, which may show different facets on the morrow. . . .

Taos, New Mexico, July 21, 1929

We are in our adobe house, on Mabel Luhan's estate, and like it. . . .

Freedom, what is it? Let's disobey the law. To first find out, to recognize, the elemental, the big laws then, one must perforce disobey the fool law, to keep to the big law. But so many seek to break the big law. Well, nature has something to say about this.

That should be my problem, my set of problems, to discover, to recognize these big elemental laws which cannot be laid aside, which keep us in life.

The *One* who made this country, this big level seeming desert table land cut out slices. They are the canyons. Then here and there he put mountains atop. Astanding here you can see six or seven thunder storms going on at the same time.*

— A sunset seems to embrace the earth.

Big sun heat.

Big everything. . . .

NOTES—*Summer 1935*

Addison, Maine

It is assumed that the Artist has Spirit and Vision—has a line of qualities that most of the many who write about him—*yap* about—but too he has that capacity for just plain work—his job—and that which is most left out a damn good pair of well balanced Eyes which respond to beauty. Therefore seeing the beauty in flower, tree, stream, mountain, the beauty of living movement as in fishes, birds, animals, and humans, he is compelled by his very nature in beholding to make Equivalents of his own seeing. As the mountain goes up and around—he makes things to go up and around. As the trees are upright and outtopped—he too makes uprights

* Cf., *Plate 41*, "Storm Over Taos, New Mexico."

and outtoppings. As the stream moves and has direction—he too makes lines that have movement and direction—and so on. For given the hut in the wood one comes quite easily to the shrine—the glorified hut surrounded by columns—the Temple—.

• We assume all intelligent peoples used nature but that in their art work—their Creative work they were not used by nature. They didn't *dare*—they didn't *assume* for when they were used by—they were copying—but when they *used nature* they were exceedingly helped.

• And this seems to have been the Eastern Concept as opposed to most of the Western Concept—when subject matter began to *use them*.

• In the first we have the well balanced picture, in the second the more or less copying of the object seen—which brings it to—that in the second case—the object seen was of itself not seen in its own creative sense.

• When the Greeks began their copyings of the human figure their work as art matter began its down grade. When individual objects became of more import than Concepted Creation and rightly put—the great seeing—the piercing seeing of the object begets an intelligent understanding so that one is Equipped for the making of Creative forms which have an Equivalent balance with those of nature—therefore becoming natural forms in themselves created by that *natural the Artist*—as real as anything—for it has its own reality—which is finality—has it that your real artist *is your Realist*. . . .

• Coming to that form of art to the which we give the designation—Picture—that is work on a flat surface—we have no distance other than the material thickness of that placed on this surface.

• Therefore I would assume that the only distance is focal distance and that all concepts are brought up to this focal distance which in this sense would make it that a man

standing one hundred yards away is as near as one standing ten feet away; that distance is crossed off and that size space to the eye takes its place; that no concept on this flat surface is a distance concept; that the surface plane of the flat shall never be destroyed, that it always has a way of coming back and asserting itself. So that the artist is now making flat plane concepts before he even touches the surface with the materials of his working. And if one were to question this he might look at a Tintoretto and I think it would be discovered that the flat surface concept is never destroyed, that he played upon it sideways, crossways, back and forth, built upon but never really destroyed. He couldn't. He had it in him to not so destroy.

•To see the artist's—(canvas and material) scene and not the impossible (other than looking directly at it) object scene. As in writing as in music as in painting you are playing with instruments. In the writing with thoughts so that they look well so that they play; with instruments so that they arrange to sound well, so that they play; in painting so that the colors—(in form and line)—*play* on and with the flat surface, that there is a sensitive balance of all parts—and that movement as I see it is the *out of balance* seeking its recovery—which if not gotten begets eternal unrest and which if seemingly obtained begets what we call rest. So the intelligent worker realizing all this, that is, the knowing the sensing of the basic laws and having it in him, pits himself and begins to play with his instruments of playing. If his play takes place on flat surface of bounded edge he must surely pull his punches when he comes to these edges—for if he does not one has all the right to say—“Your picture concept is not complete within its borders. In other words, I don't see a complete world there.” And I assume that most pictures painted cannot hold up against this challenge. . . .

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JOHN MARIN—born in Rutherford, N. J., December, 1870. Grandfather came from Ile-de-France, Mother's side, the Curreys, lived near Peekskill, N. Y., during the Revolution. Education: Stevens High School and Stevens Institute, Hoboken; two years Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art; one year Art Students' League. Four years abroad, chiefly Paris, free-lancing in etching, oil, water color. Exhibited oils in *Salon des Independents*, 1909. In 1910, ten water colors in *Salon d'Automne*. French Government purchased an oil. Introduced to U. S. A. at "291," (the pioneer center of modern art in America) in 1909. Returned to America in 1910 and has not left it since. Resident of Cliffside, N. J. Spends summers chiefly in Maine.

MARIN'S PALETTES

WATER COLORS

Blues: French ultramarine, cerulean, cobalt.

Reds: rose madder, light red, spectrum red.

Yellows: aureolin, yellow ochre, cadmium.

Greens: viridian, oxide of chromium.

Gray: Payne's gray.

Black: lamp black.

OIL COLORS

Blues: French ultramarine, cerulean.

Reds: cadmium red, Venetian red, rose madder.

Yellows: aureolin, yellow ochre, cadmium.

Green: viridian.

Brown: Mars brown.

White: zinc white.

Black: vine black.

COLLECTIONS

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS: *An American Place* (the fullest and best collection of Marin's work in every medium,—etching, water color, and oil covering every period from 1905 to the present day); *Brooklyn Museum of Art*; *Chicago Art Institute* (good examples of Marin's early and middle period water colors); *Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts* (the most important public collection of Marin's early work in water color from about 1910 to 1923,—consisting of some thirty examples, a bequest from the Ferdinand Howald Estate); *Cleveland Museum of Art*; *Detroit Art Institute*; *Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University* (several fine water colors from Marin's early Adirondacks and later White Mountains periods); *Gallery of Living Art* (an important group of Marin's early work in water color and oil); *Luxembourg Museum* (one oil, "The Mills at Meaux" of 1906); *Metropolitan Museum of Art* (a good collection of early etchings); *University of Minnesota Art Museum*; *Museum of Modern Art* (several early and late water colors from the collections of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Philip L. Goodwin); *Newark Museum of Art* (one excellent water color); *Phillips Memorial Gallery* (chiefly water colors documenting every important phase of Marin's work from about 1910 to 1930); *Providence Museum of Art*; *San Francisco Museum of Art*; *The Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Exeter Academy*; *Whitney Museum of American Art* (several fine early water colors and prints); *E. Weyhe Gallery*.

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS: Albert Boni; Charles Demuth; J. F. Dewald; Edsel Ford; Albert Gallatin (large group of early water colors); Morton Goldsmith; Philip L. Goodwin (excellent collection of water colors of all periods); Edith Halpert; Paul Haviland; Melville and Florence Kane; Gaston Lachaise; Samuel Lewisohn; Mrs. Aline Liebmann; Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.; Julius Meier-Graefe; Mrs. Eugene Meyer (important collection of Marin's early, "repercussive," New York water colors); Gerritt Miller (one of the few complete collections of Marin's etchings); Dorothy S. Norman; Georgia O'Keeffe; Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.; Paul Rosenfeld; Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Schwab; Herbert J. Seligmann; Leo Stein; Alfred K. Stern; Alfred Stieglitz (perhaps the best, single, private collection of Marin's water colors and etchings covering every phase of his work in these media from 1906 to the present day); Paul and Rebecca Strand; Robert H. Tannahill (best private collection of Marin's recent oil paintings); Edward M. M. Warburg; Mrs. Alma Wiener; Willard Huntington Wright (S. S. Van Dyne).



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